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Should Biafra survive?

STEPHEN VINCENT



THE QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT Biafra will survive as a new State will soon be decided. The creation of Biafra poses many problems to the whole course of African development and unity. The present reluctance, for example, of African nations to recognise such a new State stems from the fact that the tribal disunity that exists in Nigeria is often a very real problem within their own boundaries. To condone fragmentation abroad might produce similar effects at home. Also there is undoubtedly the feeling a Nigerian break-up is injurious both economically and politically. Economically she is seen as proportionately less expensive to run than the smaller countries, and her large size is seen as an asset in terms of opportunities for internal development. In general, though there is doubtless sympathy for the predicament of the East, the creation of Biafra is probably viewed as a disintegrating force, putting Africa one more step on the Latin American road.

Yet, to look at the condition of Nigeria over the past eighteen months, is to look at a country that has gone from a magnitude of hope and possibility down to a level of intellectual despair and economic impotence. The first military coup of January 16, 1966 brought with it a unifying vision for the entire country. Lt. Col. Ojukwu's declaration of succession, May 31, 1967 represents the ultimate breaking up of the vision in which he originally tried to participate.

Looking back at the first coup one is excited by the motives. The young military officers, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Nzeogwu, a Mid-Westerner, were obviously very critical of the Nigerian political, economic and social conditions which they planned to reform. Central to the plan was the desire to eliminate the corruption that so controlled the political life of the nation and made the productive aspects of the economy work primarily for the financial benefit of the ruling political class. The idea was that this leadership was

deceiving both the people as well as foreign interests. The politicians were failing to cope with the real problems of unemployment, the establishment of more industries, and providing an economically useful education for the young. Instead of fostering changes to speed the transformation of a predominantly peasant society into a technological one, the elite was merely educating more civil servants and mishandling and funneling a great deal of foreign money into their own pockets. As far as we can now know the intention of the original leaders was aimed at establishing a broad form of socialism, instead of what they called the present "socialism for the top five per cent".

However the vision soon failed. Almost immediately the leaders of the coup were detained. Only in the North and the West were soldiers successful in eliminating the top political leaders. In the East, either out of bungling or reluctance, no Ibo political leaders, were killed, but merely detained. It was this failure that gave political reactionaries in the North reason to call the action an "Ibo coup", an allegation that became terribly important in stimulating the Ibo massacres in the North in May and September. In any case the leaders of the coup were unable to keep control and more conservative elements in the Army, under the leadership of Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Ibo, took power.

The months that followed were full of stumbling. The Major-General and his five regional Military Governors began to work the rhetoric of reform in keeping with what was publicly a well received coup. Certainly the majority of the Nigerian population was in favour of the moves against corruption in public life. No matter where he lived in Nigeria the common man was very much aware of the price he personally had to pay for the excesses of the ruling class. There was a kind of sadistic public glee as tribunals were called and ministers and heads of public corporations had to give rather embarrassing financial account of themselves.

Along with the exposures there was a romance of public reform in the air. Letters to the Editor columns in most papers were full of suggestions to the Military Government and solutions to the country's problems. On the level of leadership in the East, for example, Ojukwu apart from establishing tribunals, took measures to correct and improve public facilities. Uncredited or illegally run schools were threatened with closure. Moves were made to stop bribery in the Civil Service. Money was sanctioned for the improvement of hospitals and roads. He made it a point to visit minority tribal group areas and take public cognizance of the lack of services and past injustices. In general he had the makings of a genuinely popular leader.

However, in Lagos, Major General Ironsi was simply not a strong leader. He had nothing to do with the original coup. And he did not prove powerful and effective as preacher of reform. There was a sense of old regime falseness about his position. In turn, his failure to instill confidence and genuinely militant leadership gave reactionaries in the North the spirit and means of organising the May massacre. Probably working with the authorisation of the Northern Emirs, who were undoubtedly in fear of losing their immense political and economic power, the myth of the "Ibo coup" was spread. Certainly in an area where resentment of the Ibo trader was often strong, the story was an effective means of stirring intra-tribal hostility. Unfortunately instead of taking strong measures to quell the suspicion, Ironsi made his most unwise decision, the Military Decree No. 34. Simply put the Decree ended the Federal system of Regions and established a Unitary form of government. The idea was to create a more efficient distribution and operation of the civil services. The Northerners, however, especially those in the Civil Service took the move as an Ibo technique of gaining control of the previously "Northernised" Civil Service, the Ibos having more qualified people than the Hausa. Soon after the decree, on May, 29, the organised and mass killing of Ibos began in all major Northern cities and a number of the smaller towns.

In spite of over 3000 Ibos killed and a large number of frightened refugees coming by train and lorry into the East, the Ibo leadership was remarkably patient. Ojukwu himself publically stated that it was a sacrifice that was being made for the development of the nation. In fact, two weeks later, with assurances from the Northern Military Governor, Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina, he announced that Ibos who had fled their jobs in the North should return, that their future safety had been guaranteed.

Yet apparently the plans of certain Northern elements were far from complete. On July 29 there was a coup from within the army. Ironsi, as well as up to two hundred officers and enlisted men of Eastern origin were killed by Northern soldiers. Lt. Col. Fajuyi, the Yoruba Military Governor of the West, who had been with Ironsi, was also killed. The Major General was replaced by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, though perhaps importantly, not a Hausa Muslim, but a minority group Tiv and a Christian.

The immediate result of the second coup was to change the political character of the country. Communications between Gowon and Ojukwu were automatically bad. On a military level Ojukwu was Gowon's superior, and

The Supreme Military Council held a three-day meeting in Lagos from Thursday to Saturday, April 20-22, 1967, and adopted the political and administrative programme of action for preserving the Federation of Nigeria as one Country.

Present:

Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces;

Colonel R.A. Adebayo, Military Governor, Western Nigeria;

Lt.-Col. D.A. Ejor, Military Governor, Mid-Western Nigeria;

Lt.-Col. H.U. Katsina, Military Governor, Northern Nigeria;

Commodore J.E.A. Wey, Head of the Navy,

Major M.O. Johnson, Military Administrator of Lagos;

Lt.-Col. E.O. Ekpo, Military Secretary, and Alhaji Kam Selem, Inspector-General of Police.

Also in attendance were the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Mr. T. Omo-Bare, and Federal and Regional officials.

Absent:

Lt.-Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor, Eastern Nigeria.

there was no real logic to his taking of power (which should have gone to Brigadier Ogundipe, a Yoruba who had fled to England during the coup). And the fact that so many Eastern officers and soldiers had been killed gave the Eastern Governor reason to fear for his life. To all intents and purposes the Nigerian Army, as such, had been destroyed. Soldiers had been disarmed and, with the important exception of the Northern soldiers who now occupied the West, were ordered to return to their Region of origin. As far as Ojukwu could immediately fathom the coup was a Northern plot to gain control of the country at the expense of the East.

To this day Gowon's motives at the time of Ironsi's killing are unclear. Certainly right after he took power, he sounded as though he were against the continued presence of the East in the Federation, publicly stating "The basis for unity no longer exists." Yet, during the ensuing weeks, either pressured by foreign powers or just a growing political and economic awareness of the financial importance of Eastern oil revenue; petroleum and rail services to the maintenance of the Federation, his tune changed. By the end of August, he announced that his one desire was to see the country go back to civilian rule and return himself and the soldiers back to the barracks. It was then he called for constitutional talks to begin in September.

Civilian "Leaders of Thought", as they were called, came from all over Nigeria to discuss means of establishing a new, politically viable form of government for the country. The main argument was between those wanting to break the five Regions up into States with a strong Central government, and those wanting to create a confederation, giving much more autonomy to the individual Regions and making a weak centre.

Those for States, such as Chief Awolowo, a Yoruba, argued that breaking the country into smaller units,

based on language and economic affiliation, would greatly reduce the fears of domination by either Yoruba, Hausa, or Ibo groups. The Northern Region, for example, whose area is greater than the combined area of the southern Regions (East, Mid-West, and West) would be broken into several States. In turn the smaller tribes (which all taken together form the majority of the Nigerian population) would have greater opportunities for self-development and their representation in a strong Central government would have a modifying effect on any exploitive designs of the larger groups.

The argument for States was and remains a thorn in the side of the Ibo leadership in the East. Two fifths of the Region's 13 million population, or what is now Biafra, is made up of minority groups. They live in the Ogoja, Calibar and Rivers area. Most significantly in terms of the present crisis are the people who live in the Rivers, the delta area from which the oil is taken. In general the Rivers people feel exploited both in terms of commerce and oil by the Ibo trader and what they see as an Ibo dominated government. Few of the towns, for example, have running water or electricity, and good roads are practically non-existent. Fully aware of the amount of money taken in oil revenues and of the 60% returned to the Eastern Government, the people feel simply deprived of legitimate services.

But in September, as now, the Ibo man was understandably in no mood to see the Region broken into smaller units. The experiences of May and July of last year had begun to convince him that he was an unwanted man. Self-preservation was foremost in his mind. Ojukwu refused to hear any talk of States in view of the circumstances. Even if he would ever agree to the concept, the occupation of the West by Northern troops gave him little reason to trust that Gowon was capable of making any honest implementation of a system of States.

To counter the criticisms of the minorities he argued that all Easterners had been affected by recent events. It was important that they remain together for self-protection. To limit their accusations of Ibo exploitation, he instituted a provincial system of administration. Ideally, to correct past injustices, the new form would give greater access to local leadership, provide better opportunities for self-development and create the possibility of better public services.

In any case the minorities were compelled to become quiet when Eastern fears of extermination by the North were being realised. Even while the Constitutional talks were still in session, the second Pogrom had begun. From September 24 until early October thousands of Easterners, some say up to 30,000, were brutally maimed or killed. Central to the aim was to eliminate the Ibo man forever from the North. As a result of the massacre there was a mass exodus of refugee Easterners, many who had not lived in the East for over a generation. The Constitutional talks were adjourned and, in spite of Gowon's attempts, have never been fully reconvened, the East having since refused to participate.

If the actions of the North started the break up of Nigeria as an economic and political fabric, it is equally true that Ojukwu's actions since October have had the effect of completing what was then set in motion. In fact, with the creation of Biafra, many of his decisions

appear to have been purposely designed to assure the future autonomy and self-sufficiency of the East.

All rail and road communications were immediately and understandably broken with the hostile North. But the action that was to be most significant in breaking off relationships with the rest of the Federation was the Military Governor's "repatriation order", given in October. By this decree all non-Easterners, with the exception of Mid-Western Ibos were compelled to leave the Region. Ojukwu announced that he could no longer guarantee their safety. Indeed the action was understandable in terms of the relatively small Hausa population. They were definitely unsafe and a number were killed before they had a chance to be evacuated. But the real reason for repatriating groups in the Southern bloc of regions was never made genuinely clear. Though the Yoruba, for example, had not openly condemned the massacre, he had certainly not participated. One possible reason was to create job vacancies for the incoming refugees.

However, especially in terms of the relationship of the East to the Mid-West and the West, the action was drastic. The effect of the Order in the West was to make the Ibo an unwanted man where until then, with the exception of some high ranking civilian officials killed by Northern soldiers, his safety, at least by the Yoruba, had not been threatened. With Westerners forced to leave their jobs in the East, the position of the Easterner in West became tenuous. The effect of the order was to jeopardize his safety and almost make it mandatory that he return home; and with the exception of Eastern minority groups, October marked the beginning of what has become the large exodus of Ibos from the West.

From the point of view of the maintenance and the development of Nigeria, Ojukwu's order is difficult to understand. Politically and economically the East was well represented in the West. A large number of Ibos occupied Civil Service positions in the Lagos-based Federal government. Economically there was a large amount of Ibo investment both in terms of capital and employees. The East, as the most densely populated area of Sub-Saharan Africa (with up to a 1000 people per/sq. mile in places) needed areas in which to expand. Both the North and the West were means by which he became economically powerful through trade. Ojukwu's father, for example, became a multi-millionaire through the cross-regional operations of his transport company.

Yet if the economic reasons for Eastern isolation appear wanting in terms of the Southern bloc, the emotions that led to the extremity of the "repatriation order" and the actions that followed are easy to get at. At no time during the second Pogrom did the Federal Government move to condemn and try to stop the literal horror that was taking place. In fact, in one broadcast to the North, after the killing had been going on several days, Gowon's biggest gesture was to say, "I receive complaints daily that up till now Easterners living in the North are being killed and molested and their property looted . . . It appears that it is now going beyond reason and is now at a point of wrecklessness and irresponsibility." Such statements were undoubtedly impossible for Ojukwu, or anyone for that matter, to abide by. Even after the killing had stopped and the East was faced with an enormous refugee problem, the Federal Government failed to take any real cognizance

of the magnitude of the situation. Their talk of rehabilitation money faded into pathetically small sums. The North refused all requests from the East for the repayment of lost and stolen properties. The apparent incapability of the Lagos and Northern leadership, up until today, to recognise the depth of the Ibo wound and to make due concessions is undoubtedly largely responsible for the isolation of the East and the ultimate creation of Biafra.

So it was first in October, when neither decent or intelligent leadership was forthcoming from Lagos that the Eastern Government began to lay the psychological foundations for separation. For many of the expatriates resident in the East, and those Nigerians unsympathetic to the idea, it was a difficulty operation to witness. The spirit of reform that existed after the first coup completely disappeared. The regime demanded total support for its views. In short the East became a Police State.

First the fear was established, legitimate or not, that Gowon and Northern forces planned to invade the East and complete their genocidal operations. It was necessary to get prepared. If the fear of Ibo domination reached paranoid levels in the North, the fear of Hausa domination was established on an equal level in the East. Vast sums of money, much of which was initially intended for rehabilitation use, was spent on the acquisition of arms. New troops were recruited and an Eastern Army of 6000 men was established free of any real connection with the Nigerian Army.

The Region was scattered with road blocks, to check subversive activities, but undoubtedly also to keep up the level of apprehension. Certain papers, considered anti-East, were soon banned. The Public Information Service put out a series of posters warning "Be Vigilant—Report Any Strange Face To The Police". Others read, "Don't Sell Your Region" and "This Man is prepared—Are You?" (A soldier pictured with a bayoneted gun). By March, District Officers were touring public schools to instruct students on what to do in case of an enemy invasion. Courses in Civil Defence were begun all over the Region.

The North, for obvious reasons, was defined as the enemy. The *Nigerian Outlook*, the government paper, or as it is now called, *The Biafra Sun*, continually painted the Hausa as a barbaric creature. He was lazy, irrational and feudal in his way of life. The Easterner, on the other hand was modern, progressive and intellectual. It was the East who had carried the burden of building all that was modern in Nigeria. And the East, through its new autonomy, would no longer be shackled by the Northern reactionaries. Attempts were even made by certain University lecturers to establish a spiritual concept of an Eastern identity, free of any acknowledgement of either the North or the West.

Politically Ojukwu sought the pledged support from all the tribal groups and factions in the East. Contrary to the spirit of the first coup, he was pictured now with the older, now released politicians, most notably the former Eastern Premier, Dr. Michael Okpara, seeking advice. In the minority areas the elders and chiefs became his source of support. The image of Eastern unity was the primary aim. Since October, any talk of



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States was tantamount to treason. The minority leaders who still spoke in favour of States were quietly detained. Those who were in Lagos, as number of minority leaders are, were labeled Northern stooges by the newspapers and declared enemies of the East.

How successful Ojukwu has been in creating a sense of Biafra remains to be seen. Certainly among the Ibos he was able to gain mass support. The memory of the massacres, the savagery, the terrible loss of life, the Hausa soldier occupation of the West and the belief in a threatening invasion from the North was more than enough to give the Military Governor a strong and unqualified backing. And certainly within the Civil Service and the University community the possibility of Biafra has created a zeal to obtain the positions and opportunities that will come with the opening of new ministries and foreign missions. Refugee Civil Servants and Lecturers have been especially loyal to the idea of separation since, even if a genuine Federation were resumed it would be very difficult to return to jobs they have given up. If there has been criticism from the propertied and trading classes who doubtless initially stand to lose from the complete break up of the Federation, it has been quiet and apparently ineffective against the arguments of Ojukwu's government and the call to tribe.

Criticism, though necessarily muted, has come from certain intellectuals who continue to define themselves as Nigerians and see Ojukwu as a mere Machiavellian working to establish an isolated pocket of power and control without any real vision. Their argument is that such a new State would be essentially no different than the previous Nigeria. Contrary to the idea of the first coup, they argue, Ojukwu has enacted no real plan for a thorough transformation of the society, and that all present appearances suggest that the new State will again exist primarily for the satisfaction of the political leadership, the Civil Service and academic classes. In general this group sides with the minorities and only sees a situation of real development coming out of association with the rest of the Federation. However, because of the present mode of government, much of this criticism has had to remain underground.

Ojukwu's lack of real success with the minority groups, especially those in the Rivers, has most seriously raised the question of whether or not Biafra should survive. The number of troops occupying the Calibar and Rivers areas before the present fighting suggests the amount of fear the Ibo has of a minority group up-rising. In these areas, in spite of the official pledges of support, there is a definite feeling against secession and a prejudice in favour of States.

In any case, while Ojukwu, successfully or not, worked to create the concept of the East as a separate entity, Gowon's efforts ironically did little more than to assist the process. In spite of his declared intention to keep Nigeria one, most of his actions did nothing but reinforce the Eastern Government's isolated position. In fact the Federal Government's relationship with the East over the past nine months has been a history of broken promises.

This failure of Gowon's leadership was most blatantly revealed after the Aburi accords. The meeting in February of the military governors in Ghana had done much to re-establish the communications between the East and the rest of the Federation. It appeared real concessions were about to be made. Among them the Lagos government had agreed to a large rehabilitation grant to the East, the continued payment of salaries to Civil Service employees forced to flee their jobs, and the agreement to establish regional commands for the army and a decision not to use force as a means of settling disputes.

The failure to implement the Aburi accords was the real finish of communication between Lagos and the East. There was simply no chance of dignity left for Ojukwu within the national framework. By April, the design for Biafra was going into effect. Ojukwu ordered all Federal revenues collected in the Region to be paid directly to the Eastern Government. Subsequently all Federal corporations and services were put under Enugu control.

In May, Gowon reacted with a few economic measures, limiting shipping access to Eastern ports and stopping postal and money orders. Several times he reiterated his will to use force if necessary to stop Ojukwu's actions. The prohibitive actions and statements were fruitless. Finally on May 29, in a broadcast to the nation, he declared a state of emergency and unilaterally declared the creation of 12 States. The North was divided into five, the West Three, the Mid-West remained one, and the East was divided into three States. The East Central State was primarily Ibo and the minority tribes (which number about twelve) were divided into two States, Calibar-Ogoja and the Rivers.

In the East the immediate effect of Gowon's declaration was to create a certain amount of emotional disunity. The Ibos were naturally scornful of the move. The heavy presence, of course, of military troops in the

minority areas prevented the possibility of any uprising, planned or not. However, at the University of Nigeria, or Biafra, as it is now called, a large number of Effik, Ibibio and Rivers students immediately left the campus for home. There were either one of two good reasons for their departure. One is that if Gowon did invade, and did receive the support of the minorities, these students would have been very vulnerable to reprisals from the Ibos. And of course the other reason is that those favouring States would want to be home to assist in the struggle. The fact, however, that the minority students (though not all) left right at the beginning of the exam period suggests the emotional depth of the tensions that exist in the East and the lack of a full faith support in Ojukwu.

On Monday morning, May 31, in an hour long speech, Ojukwu declared the secession of the East and the establishment of the Republic of Biafra. Immediately following the announcement Gowon's government began to implement what has been a very effective economic blockade. All Eastern accounts in the rest of the Federation were frozen, postal services stopped, shipping firms, with the exception of oil tankers, forbidden to call on Eastern ports and the Assaba-Onitsha bridge, across the Niger, linking the East to the Mid-West was closed. Without postal services, independent form of currency, or International airport the East was effectively isolated.

What will happen now to Nigeria and Biafra is difficult to say. It would not be fair, however, to point out the inherent weakness' in the concept of Biafra, and not insist on similar cases of disunity existing through out the rest of the Federation. There are similar fears of domination, for example, by the Yoruba from the Hausa. At one point in May, as a matter of fact, Chief Awolowo announced that if the East succeeded, so would the West. Apparently he has since changed his view.

What is probably most clear, in all of this, if Biafra does survive the present military fighting is that it will be an unhappy place. The Ibo leadership will never be able to quell the suspicions of the minority groups. The Calibar, Ogoja, and Rivers peoples will continue to feel they are no more than a tool of Ibo survival, and that Biafra is at the expense of greater possibilities for self-development within a State-Federal framework. At the same time Enugu will have to spend most of its energies suppressing rebellious internal interests and being prepared to defeat new external threats. Under these conditions the police state character of the present society will continue for a long time.

And yet if Gowon is finally successful in preventing the East from dropping out of the Federation, the concept of Nigeria is going to have to go through some radical changes. The events of the last eighteen months cannot be ignored. The legitimate grievances of the Ibo will have to be recognised if he is ever again going to make positive contributions to the development of the country. Not to do so would be to create a permanent state of rebellion in the East, one that would insure a ugly and continuing civil war. □

At the time of going to press, playwright Wole Soyinka is still held in detention by Federal authorities in Ibadan.